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Sleeping Partners

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Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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I

After the roller-coaster ride of recent events Pauline Watkins should have grown used to seeing the stuff of her wildest fantasies made manifest, but being massaged by the coin-in-the-slot vibrating chair in Kuala Lumpur took the biscuit.

It had been gentle with her at first but now, with a surprisingly single-minded assertiveness, it grabbed the back of her neck between two leather-clad steel balls and reminded her of . . . something she had come away to forget. She felt guilty, heartbroken, aroused – and suddenly extremely anxious that she hadn't left a note out saying where to find the spare linen. Which these days was just par for the course. So why did she feel so close to the edge of hysteria that her toes were curling in her shoes?

Perhaps it was the added stress of having just stepped off a disorienting fourteen-hour flight (or maybe it was the thought of having to step on to another eight-hour flight almost immediately). But being in the grip of these inappropriate dizzying feelings in the middle of a hot and humid crowded airport concourse, with her husband taking photographs and her teenage daughter looking on, was about as bizarre as she could handle.

'Poll. Polly!' Mick called to her, sizing her up in his viewfinder. 'Smile for the birdie! You're supposed to be looking relaxed!'

The whirlpool of emotions that she was sure were reflected

in her facial expression, were instantly replaced by a look of intense irritation. 'Pauline,' she corrected him tersely. God! If he couldn't even cope with *this* change in her, what hope was there for their marriage? She forced herself to smile through gritted teeth for the family album.

Her uncomfortable feelings of guilt having been neatly transmuted into resentment against her husband, she was now free to lie back and enjoy the good vibrations of the chair, and even to wallow defiantly in the sense memories which it awakened. But just as she was remembering a pair of indefatigable hands sensually massaging her body all over, the machine stopped as abruptly as it had started.

'Have you finished now, then?' her daughter Gemma asked her in a nasty accusing tone, which carried with it no respect for post-coital tranquillity, and even less for her mother. 'Can I go and get a Coke now, please?'

'Feel free,' said Pauline, struggling out of the chair with some reluctance. 'I don't know why you felt you had to stay to watch anyway.'

'Dad wouldn't let me go on my own,' Gemma supplied, glowering darkly at her father. 'He thought his likkle girlie might get lost.'

'If only,' was on the tip of Pauline's tongue as she surveyed this fruit of her loins, but she reminded herself sharply that Gemma had reason enough to feel resentful at the moment, so instead she dug around in her handbag for her purse and said, 'The Cokes are on me. Set 'em up!'

Striding over to the self-service cafeteria, followed – or rather, policed, as far as she was concerned – by her parents, Gemma thought she might die of suffocation long before this fortnight was over. She was eighteen for God's sake, nearly nineteen actually – old enough to vote, to drink, to smoke, to marry – and far too old to be on holiday alone with her mum

and dad. What *had* she been thinking of? She cursed her stupid brother for not bunking off uni and coming with them, and her heart ached for her boyfriend Stu. If only he'd had more luck in finding work, if only he'd been able to save enough for his airfare . . . Life was horrible. It wasn't fair. Whose idea was it anyway, to go to Australia? Hers and Stu's. They'd been planning it ever since school. Trust her mother to steal their ideas and make them her own. It was daylight bleddy robbery when you thought about it.

And now Dad had uttered his favourite phrase which always made her want to kill, and was wanging on with his precious Facts and Figures. How the hell could she possibly survive fourteen days of this?

'It's a pity,' said Mick, innocently unaware that those three words could turn his daughter's thoughts to patricide, 'that we can't go out and explore Kuala Lumpur. I'd have liked to have seen the Petronas Twin Towers. Designed by the same chap as did the Canary Wharf tower in London. Argentinian. Cesar Pelli. It's 452 metres high, and the two towers are joined by a 58 metre skybridge. Quite a feat. Kuala Lumpur started as a British tin-mining outpost in 1857.' He looked around the cafeteria at his fellow travellers. 'You'll have noticed, even here in the airport, its interesting ethnic mix: 58 per cent of the population are Malay, with 31 per cent Chinese, 8 per cent Indian, and 3 per cent "other", making the Malaysian cuisine one of the most interesting in the world. Average temperature 32 degrees centigrade, 90 degrees Fahrenheit, all year round. Tropical, you see. But very humid: 80 per cent. Of course, they get 2700 millimetres of rainfall a year – or 105 inches – so that's hardly surprising. It's GMT plus 8 hours here, so whereas we left England . . .' he paused to consult his watch '. . . almost fifteen hours ago, it's actually nearly a whole day later already. Weird that, isn't it, when you think about it?

Because by the time we reach Melbourne we'll have lost a whole half-day. Twenty-two hours in the air, but we land thirty-four hours after we took off. Of course, we gain it again on our way back, but . . .'

If he'd held his audience's attention at the outset he had certainly lost it now, but Mick was impervious to such outward signs as heavy sighs and eyes cast heavenward, so interested was he by his inner world of data. Facts were dependable, and reassuringly constant in an ever changing world, and Mick collected them with the same enthusiasm as a child on a beach swoops on shells. Indeed, were he ever to find the courage to answer questions in a television studio rather than from the safety of his own settee, Mick could have been a billionaire – he wouldn't even need to phone a friend. It was feelings that had him confused and all at sea. That, and talking about feelings, as his wife Pauline could testify. With knobs on.

So here they sit now – the Watkins of Leicester – together but alone, in Kuala Lumpur airport, sipping Coke in a country they'll never see, in a time zone that makes no sense to their internal clocks, sweating in temperatures their bodies weren't designed to withstand: the lone representative of the spear side keeping chaos at bay with his hard facts of general knowledge; the two members of the distaff side yearning for the lovers they've left behind. An ordinary family, whose lives are about to change in ways they could not even begin, at this moment, to envisage.

Of course, change was what it was all about. It was the desire for change that had brought them this far already. And all because Pauline Watkins had woken up one morning earlier in the year and discovered she was thirty-nine. Thirty-nine! Next step forty! Halfway to death already, she mused, as her

husband arrived in the bedroom with a cup of tea and a card, and what had she achieved? A semi-detached house on the same estate she'd grown up on, her parents up the road, her sister round the corner, her brother a mere stroll away – not to mention the cousins, aunties, uncles, grandparents, friends of the family who went back three generations, all within nodding distance of her own front door; a soul-sapping job in tele-sales; a son away at university, who spent most of his time, she felt sure in her bones, dodging lectures; a daughter who, together with her slacker boyfriend, was doing a gap year which looked to Pauline more like a void; and last but not least, a husband who hadn't touched her in more than a year. Hers was a centre which could not hold. Must not hold. If it did, she might just as well roll over right now and cark it. Such was the darkness of her thoughts at the dawn of her fortieth year.

But Pauline was no quitter and no slouch, and as the weeks went by, rolling over and carking it had slipped way down her agenda of Things To Be Done, and had been completely nudged off her new, more pressing list of Stuff That Needs Doing Urgently. And ironically, it had been her husband's birthday present to her which had occasioned this particular transformation. She supposed now she should be grateful, but at the time it had been all she could do not to throw her morning tea in his stupid placid face and scream like a banshee.

'A *computer* course? *Me?* Have you totally and utterly taken leave of your senses?' A rhetorical question, since clearly he had. Mick just grinned back haplessly, with that irritating mix of affability and embarrassment which was intrinsically his. 'What the hell makes you think I'd be interested in *that*?' she continued mercilessly, waving the receipt from the Adult Education Centre like a weapon beneath his nose. What she wanted from him – what she ached for, if he had but asked – was to be the object of his desire again. A weekend in Paris, a

couple of days in London – even, for God's sake, a table for two at the local Harvester – would have gone down better than this.

'It's not a computer course as such,' he explained patiently, as if she cared about the difference. 'It's an Introduction to the Internet. The World Wide Web at your fingertips. I thought you'd find it, you know, interesting. Stimulating. Like you said the other week. About being bored and wanting more stimulation.'

Pauline choked on a bitter laugh which sounded like a sob. Speechless. He had rendered her speechless. He stood there, pathetically vulnerable, his goodness shining from every pore, trying and failing to make her feel better. She'd said her life was empty, and he had tried to give her the world. Did he really not understand, after all she'd said on the subject, that the world she longed for was nestled in his pyjamas bottoms, curled up and sleeping, as was its wont? He'd kissed her affectionately then, and given her a brotherly hug, had slipped back into bed with her and said, 'Fancy a birthday cuddle? We've got half an hour before we need to get up.' And it was in that thirty minutes, as her husband lay sleeping contentedly with her in his arms, that she lay awake, vowing to Change Their Lives or Bust.

In fact, in those few days of her descent into the darkness known as early middle age, 'bust' was the byword which brought her most comfort. Both her kids had left school now. Her son Matt was in his second year of uni, and although he was only over at Nottingham, they rarely saw him between laundry runs. Gemma, though still technically living at home in her gap year, spent most of her time round at her boyfriend Stu's. Apparently – or so they claimed – they were planning their world trip before taking up their places at university. So

what was to keep Pauline at home? Wasn't she free now to leave her sexless marriage and strike out on her own, before it was too late, before she got so wrinkled and repulsive that no man, let alone her husband, would spare her a second glance?

Thus she reviewed her life in the dark light of depression. Who needed her? Whose heart went boom-boody-boom when she walked into a room? Nobody's – unless you counted the dog's, and then only at meal times. So what was she *for*, exactly? What point was there in heaving herself out of bed in the mornings, to go to a fluorescent-lit cubicle, to clamp a headset to her ears and work through the phone directory, cold-calling recalcitrant consumers of conservatories? It was no kind of job for a woman who had forgotten that she had a right to be here, that she was a child of the universe, no less than the trees and stars: indeed, these days she laughed hollowly whenever her eye came to rest on the inspiriting text of the Desiderata in the smallest room at home (painstakingly copied in her best calligraphy by Gemma, aged fourteen, as an expression of filial counsel). No, Pauline was buggered if she would go placidly, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. And if Max Ehrmann had had her life, she thought bitterly, she doubted that he would even have had the neck to suggest she try.

Nevertheless, the date arrived when it was time for her inaugural session at night school, and Mick drove her cheerfully, and with enthusiastic words of encouragement, to the local college to take her place behind a computer console, reminding her of the time when her mother had abandoned her on her first day at infant school. Under the cover of hanging her coat on the back of her chair, she dared to squint round the room and saw that, despite her misgivings, there was an upside to this after all. Since most of her fellow pupils were septuagenarians, she was the youngest one there by far.

That first session was unremarkable in every aspect bar one. This is a computer, this switch turns it on, the secret code is www dot, begin. The one remarkable aspect was he who was the keeper of this arcane knowledge. He had a wonderful warmth about him, an engaging kind of certainty that he *did* have a right to be here, and that, moreover, being here was fun: the sort of person who looked as if he felt comfortable in his own skin. She kept sneaking glances at him, sure that she recognised him from somewhere, if only she could put her finger on where.

By the end of the session, though she had learnt what a search engine was and knew how to Ask Jeeves, she was still no closer to answering the question 'Who the bloody hell is he?', but by now it was driving her mad. And though she dallied while collecting her things together, hoping to give him the chance, perhaps, to recognise her and introduce himself, he passed up the opportunity and left the class with a charming smile, assuring them all of his best attentions next week.

It was Mick who put his finger on it when he came to collect her. She was buckling herself into the passenger seat next to him, and answering his excited query, 'How was it?' with a sniffed, 'Not bad,' when he leant over her suddenly, wound down her window, and called out, 'Asheem!', which at first she took for a sneeze. Turning to follow her husband's gaze she saw her tutor approach them. He bent down to peer into their car.

'Mr Watkins!' he said. 'And *Mrs* Watkins. Of course, how silly of me! I thought I knew you from somewhere, but I couldn't quite—'

'Me too,' she assured him. 'How've you been?' It was Dolly and Dinesh's youngest from next door, and it was small wonder she hadn't been able to place him in her mind. Last seen, he had been the irritating, wiry little youth who kept

banging his football against their shared garden fence, eventually breaking it. A decade on, the prodigal had returned home, grown up, matured, and filled out in all the right places.

Naturally it made sense to all three parties that, in future, Asheem should give Pauline a lift to and from the classes. Natural, too, that during these short journeys an easy intimacy developed between them – she had, after all, known him since he was a lad, and she was interested to hear what he'd been doing with his life. Less natural, she told herself fiercely, as she censured herself in the bathroom mirror on the evening of week four, for her to be suddenly taking such pains over her hair and make-up. She decided to give week five a miss. But week six was the last session, and calling for her, Asheem wouldn't take no for an answer. To anything, as it so transpired. After the lesson, there was a goodbye drink in the pub with the rest of the class. By the time they left, they both knew they'd be taking the long route home.

That first time, the intensity of her own passion had shocked her. As Asheem had driven them further from home and closer to the point of no return, she had tried to reason herself out of it. It was foolhardy, it was reckless, there was too much at stake. But when he finally brought the car to a halt in Groby Pool car park, she was trembling from head to foot with the anticipation of his touch.

At thirty-nine to his twenty-nine, she was no Mrs Robinson coaching a graduate – if anything it was just the reverse. Whatever else Asheem had been doing in the ten years since he'd left home, he had certainly not neglected his studies in how to make a woman happy. He was inventive and inexhaustible, it seemed, even in the confined space of his car. And it was so wonderful to feel desired again at last. She felt like Sleeping Beauty, just woken up and raring to go. Driving back afterwards, Pauline knew she would do this again. Didn't

they have the perfect excuse for him to be in her home on her afternoons off? If anybody saw him coming and going from her house, he'd been giving her extra computer lessons, hadn't he?

A couple of hours later she was wide awake, lying beside a happily snoozing Mick in their marital bed. At first, the dreadful guilt that was nudging at the corners of her mind was assuaged by her feelings of anger and resentment towards him. This was all his fault anyway – she wouldn't be doing this if Mick had ever taken her complaints seriously. Every time she'd tried to engage him in serious debate over the last twelve months, he'd just agreed, embarrassed and shamefaced, that something needed to be done, and then afterwards done nothing. So if she had been forced to have recourse to infidelity, who in the world could blame her? Herself, apparently.

Tossing and turning, sleep avoiding her like the plague, she finally got up and crept downstairs to make herself a cup of tea and try to think things through. Tempting as it was to blame Mick for her own actions, she was a big girl now and she knew it was specious. She must stop this immediately, nip it in the bud. She didn't like being a liar and a cheat. But if she didn't vent her frustration by sleeping with Asheem, she'd be back being a sexless blob and she already knew she couldn't handle that. And was it cheating, really, when what she was giving away to the boy next door was something her husband couldn't have made plainer that he truly didn't want?

Round and round she went, for hours and hours, locked inside a circular argument, till she thought her head might explode. By 4 a.m., vexed almost to screaming point, she knew she wasn't going to solve her problem tonight any more than she'd been able to solve it before this . . . latest complication . . . had come along to haunt her. But neither could she

clock off and go to sleep. Needing distraction from the torture of her thoughts, she sat at the family computer with her third cup of tea, and idly began to surf the web. And so it was, ironically, that at the very moment she stopped seeking the answer, she found it.

Since escape was on her mind – from herself, from her life – she started looking up faraway places. It was soothing to see pictures of the sand and sea and sun in exotic locations, even though she knew she would never be able to afford to visit them in person. But as one site led to another in her desultory, random search, she suddenly found herself staring at the screen and sitting up straight with interest. She had arrived at www.fairexchange.biz, which appeared to offer the impossible. For the modest price of a joining fee, you could be matched up to a family in a far-flung place and swap houses for the duration, with no more money changing hands at all. A free holiday! Or almost. No hotel bills, no expensive eating out in restaurants: all you needed to find was the airfare . . .

She stopped then, and paced about the room wild-eyed, her thoughts leaving the problem of her husband and turning to the problem of her daughter. Wouldn't this solve everything, in one fell swoop, all of them going to Australia together, on a big family holiday? For all Gemma and her boyfriend's talk about taking a year off to see the world before going to university, so far they hadn't taken one step out of Leicester. It wasn't Gemma who was dragging her heels – to Pauline's surprise, her daughter had actually bitten the bullet and was doing the required low-paid, menial work necessary to fund this exercise – it was her boyfriend, Stu. Excuse followed excuse about why he was unable to find profitable employment, and whereas Pauline and Mick had talked abut helping Gemma out with a bit of cash as a reward for all her hard work, there was no way in the world that they had the inclination or

the wherewithal to help hopeless Stu. Maybe this could be the answer? Without need for confrontation, they could get her away from his influence for a while. They'd include him in the invitation, of course, but safe in the knowledge that he'd never get his act together to come.

Her mind now racing, Pauline thought too of her absent son, Matt. Since he'd started at Nottingham Uni last year she'd missed him terribly, and though she would never dream of pressuring him, she wished that he'd come home more often. What if she dangled the carrot of a couple of weeks in Australia – would he bite? And could she and Mick ever manage to scrape the price of four airfares together, without having to take out a loan?

Returning to her seat she pictured the rose-tinted scene, coloured by memories of all those happy holidays, long ago, when the kids had been small. Couldn't she recapture that now, remind herself of what she had, rather than what she couldn't have? And wasn't there just the tiniest, remotest possibility that Mick might remember too? If they could just break this cycle, step away from the norm, find a small pocket of space and time where they could breathe again, be together again, perhaps even fall in love again . . . ?

Impulsively, she turned back to the computer and keyed in her credit card details to join the house-swap scheme. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, she thought giddily, as she filled out the online form to offer her three-bedroomed home in exchange for similar, anywhere in Australia. Finally, exhausted and exhilarated, she pressed Send, and dispatched all her hopes to the ether. Now fate would take its turn, and determine whether it would be Sydney or Adelaide, Melbourne or Perth, or a resort on the exotically named Gold Coast. What did she care, so long as they were all together on the other side of the world?